

Trump shows uncharacteristic patience in Gaza peace efforts

● Truce got off to a shaky start, but the US is ensuring there's no backsliding by Israel



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Donald Trump's 20-point peace plan for Gaza has many vaguely worded and ill-defined elements. Nevertheless, some aspects are extremely clear, and it is these that make it a radical document with the potential to redefine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Like all such plans and ceasefires in the Middle East, this one got off to a rocky start. The ink was hardly dry when there were claims and counterclaims of breaches by both sides. There was a serious outbreak of violence as Hamas fired rockets at an Israeli tank unit, killing two officers. Israel retaliated by bombing Hamas tunnels and infrastructure. But the flare-up was short-lived.

There will be many such "incidents" as the plan moves forward, but the key is that the violence remains below a threshold level so as not to jeopardise the overall plan. This is what used to be called in Northern Ireland "an acceptable level of violence". It is simply seen as the cost of doing the business of peace.

Foremost among the radical elements of Trump's plan is its unambiguous statement that there will be no Israeli annexations of Gaza or the West Bank. Given the creeping annexation policy through settlements pursued by successive Israeli governments of both left and right, this seems to be the US president's way of drawing a line in the Palestinian sand. It is telling Israel: thus far and no further.

What is also remarkable is that Trump has persuaded the most right-wing prime minister of one of the most right-wing governments in Israel's history to sign up to this. Benjamin Netanyahu has done something that no centre or centre-left government could have ever done: sign away the messianic dreams of a greater Israel to possess the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria, otherwise known as the West Bank.

As an indication of how bitter the Israeli extreme right-wing feels about this, last month far-right Knesset members passed a preliminary bill authorising the

annexation of the West Bank. A move that is vehemently opposed by both Trump and the moderate Arab states.

During a recent visit to Israel to shore up the peace plan, US vice president JD Vance called the vote a "very stupid political stunt". He reiterated the US position as described in the peace plan that "the West Bank will not be annexed by Israel".

Trump's plan also breaks new political ground in another important respect. For the first time ever, Netanyahu has signed a document accepting something that he and his Likud party have rejected out of hand repeatedly: a Palestinian state.

Undoubtedly, what is designed to satisfy a critical requirement of the Arab states, the plan states "the conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood, which we recognise as the aspiration of the Palestinian people". It will not happen immediately as it is conditioned on other prerequisites being met, but the principle of a Palestinian state has been accepted by the signatories to this document.

The plan's immediate priorities are ending the war; disarming Hamas; establishing a new security and governance architecture; and rebuilding Gaza.

How Gaza is to be rebuilt is not specified, but from discussions and leaks, a novel approach is taking shape.

To understand what might be about to take place, it is important to realise that Trump's plan was drawn up by real-estate entrepreneurs who honed their negotiating skills in the hard-scrabble New York world of construction finance, building regulations and intransigent labour unions. More particularly, it was not conceived by geopolitical luminaries from the sedate world of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

At the moment, Gaza is controlled more or less 50/50 by the Israeli Defence Forces and Hamas. Trump's plan envisages a phased withdrawal of the IDF, initially to behind the so-called "yellow line" and subsequently, assuming the other key conditions are met, to behind a "red line".

Absent is last February's "Mar-a-Gaza" notion that the US would "take over" Gaza and "own it".

Gone also are the provocative and counterproductive suggestions that Palestinians would "love to leave Gaza", which was regarded by Arab states as little more than ethnic cleansing.

This new plan is specifically tailored

to the meet the needs of "Palestinians living in Gaza".

To do this, however, real estate realism recognises that disarming Hamas won't happen overnight, and that de-radicalising most Palestinians in Gaza is a long-term process.

In order to deliver this "new Gaza", the Strip will be divided into two zones; a largely coastal area to the west under international supervision, and an inland area to the east which will be home to residual recalcitrants and Hamas hardliners.

"West Gaza" will be rebuilt on the basis of the only article of faith that property developers the world over adhere to: "build it and they will come".

It will not be so much a "shining city on a hill" as a modern coastal development that might not look out of place in Dubai. On the other hand, "East Gaza" will continue as at present; a welfare state entirely dependent on UN aid and international handouts.

In the belief that most Palestinians want a decent life for themselves and their children, the plan envisages a gradual migration west for better wages, housing, education and medical care.

However, entry to this newly built economic zone will only be possible for those who renounce violence and accept the state of Israel. Having been denied a vote at the ballot box for over two decades, it is thought that Palestinians will be willing to vote with their feet for a better life.

Clearly there is much that can go wrong with all of this. The plan might even be derailed by a civil war in Gaza, as the clans that have been armed by Israel take on Hamas, which itself is executing and torturing Gazans in broad daylight.

The naysayers and liberal-left purists of the English-speaking world will have a field day pointing out its flaws. Their sensibilities offended by the very thought of capitalist property developers creating a workable peace in Gaza.

But what if it works? Trump has certainly shown uncharacteristic patience and sticking power in his efforts to bring peace to the region. Last week alone, a series of senior administration officials descended on Israel for what one described as "Bibi-sitting" — ensuring no backsliding by Netanyahu.

And if the flawed instrument that is Donald Trump succeeds in ending the Israeli-Palestinian forever war, he will deserve a Nobel peace prize — and probably an Oscar as well.